



Anholon, R, Rampasso, IS, Martins, VWB, Serafim, MP, Leal Filho, W and Quelhas, OLG (2021) COVID-19 and the targets of SDG 8: reflections on Brazilian scenario. *Kybernetes*, 50 (5). pp. 1679-1686. ISSN 0368-492X

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/628147/>

Version: Accepted Version

Publisher: Emerald

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/K-12-2020-0833>

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

COVID-19 and the targets of SDG 8: Reflections on Brazilian scenario

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Kybernetes 01 Jan 2021

<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/K-12-2020-0833/full/html>

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Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq) under grants 307536/2018-1 and 305442/2018-0; by Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001, under process 88887.464433/2019-00; and by Universidade do Estado do Pará, under grant 626/18.

Abstract

Purpose: This viewpoint aims to present reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic impacts in the search for the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) disseminated by the UN. These reflections are made considering the Brazilian scenario.

Design / Methodology / Approach: Since it is a viewpoint, several information presented here are based on authors opinion. However, to enhance the information basis and present examples, a bibliographic research was also conducted.

Findings: Analyzing the targets of SDG 8 and the probable crisis in the Brazilian economy as a consequence of the pandemic, we believe that this crisis will impact the achievement of these targets.

Originality / Value: This viewpoint calls attention to issues that demand urgent public policies, otherwise, they can generate losses to an entire generation of Brazilians.

Practical implications: The reflections presented here can contribute with the debates about the search for decent work in Brazil. It is worth to remember that the development of actions aligned with SDG 8 targets generates more than only economic gains, since they contribute for building a more just, egalitarian and inclusive society.

Keywords: SDG8; COVID-19 pandemic; Brazilian Context

Paper Type: Viewpoint

1. Introduction

In January 2020, the Chinese province of Wuhan called attention of the world when authorities warned about the contagion of a new virus (or Sars-CoV-2), responsible for causing the COVID-19 (CoronaVirus Disease - 2019). In few months, governments worldwide and their society had to organize themselves to face the greatest humanitarian crisis of the 21st century. The pandemic coping measures are focused on reducing the spread of contamination of the population. It seeks, through sanitary measures and social isolation, a flattening of the contagion curve and to reduce the pressure on health systems, allowing better preparation to face the crisis at its peak (MORAES, 2020; Roth et al., 2020).

In this sense, the measures of social isolation, adopted in several countries, showed the dependency of productive activities on a lifestyle that requires consumption cycles. Along with the sanitary and epidemiological crisis, expressed in the worst face of the

disease's lethality, the economic system collapsed minimally (World Bank, 2020). The pandemic effects on the economy and on people's lives were observed in countries with greater social and economic conditions, as well as in regions and countries that were already in a vulnerable situation (UN-ECLAC, 2020). International geopolitics has also changed rapidly: borders have been closed and trade relations have changed.

With the impact on the global production and services chain, emergency measures were taken by nation-states (even those that are highly liberal) to retain jobs¹, through measures for reducing the negative impacts on business sectors, such as reduction of labor costs, making flexible or subsidizing working hours or allowing temporary wage reduction, or measures to ensure minimum survival conditions for the poorer social classes, such as social cash transfer programs (Said, 2020).

Although, for few months, it was possible to verify a reduction in contamination rate of the so-called first wave of disease transmission, WHO (World Health Organization) epidemiological indexes point to a second wave of contamination of COVID-19. In a scenario in which part of the countries had not yet emerged from the first wave and where the economic recovery had not yet reached minimally acceptable levels, the financing and planning capacity of the governments enters a second cycle of exhaustion, aggravated by domestic and external indebtedness. Parallel to this, the lack of prospects for recovery, whether economic, social, cultural and minimally socializing life at normal levels, has been changing people's behavior.

The mental health indexes of younger groups, for example, show that they are more exposed to depression and anxiety problems (Ahmed MZ, Ahmed O, Aibao Z, Hanbin S, Siyu L, 2020). The impacts of isolation on children's socialization are also being viewed with great concern by the scientific community (GV, 2020; Liu et al., 2020), it should also be noted that the confinement of work, household and school activities in the same space generates pressure on the economically active population at significant rates of burnout and stress. If these elements were already portrayed by several studies that emphasized a strong relationship between economic recession, insecurity and impacts on mental health (Frasquilho et al., 2015; Reichert & Tauchmann, 2017; Milner, Shields, King., 2019), it is unfortunately expected that, in the current reality, these indices will be even more expressive.

Sustainable development is related to the development of national and international policies (Donaires et al., 2019). As a result, the measures and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets are even more urgent in light of the impacts we are experiencing. Among these impacts, the offer of decent work is directly related with SDG 8. The concept of decent work was formalized by the International Labor Organization (ILO), in 1999, which summarized it as the constant search for the promotion of

“opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity, for overcoming poverty, reducing social inequalities, guaranteeing democratic governance and sustainable development” (OIT, 1999, p. 3).

Ghai (2003) details this concept in four interconnected elements: work, social security, fundamental labor rights and social dialogue. Work is understood as a broad category, which applies to workers in the formal and informal economy, self-employed

¹ Experiences such as Kurzarbeit (Germany), Partielle d'Activité (France), Noodmaatregel Overbrugging Werkgelegenheid (Netherlands), Keeper (Australia), Federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES-USA) and the Emergency Program Maintenance of Employment and Income (Brazil).

or domestic workers. It also refers to access to adequate opportunities, remuneration and minimum conditions for safety and health at work. This category is supported by the second category: social security, which is understood as social protection policies and mechanisms in the country, in which work and workers are located, according to their capacity and level of development. The other two categories, in turn, are directly related with fundamental rights (freedom of association, non-discrimination in the workplace and extreme restraint on slave and child labor) and with the exercise of workers' rights, with their engagement in discussions and negotiations regarding their work with authorities and employers.

The most recent studies on decent work demonstrate how this concept is vague and extremely comprehensive (Burchell, B., Sehnbruch, K., Piasna, A., & Agloni, 2014), which makes it difficult to compare the historical evolution of decent work theme at international level and, in parallel, discussions may be minimally polarized among certain social actors.

Without expanding too much the debates of the analytical movements that explain the political, organizational or ergonomic and sociological aspects of work, what they have in common is an attempt to explain how the world of work performs and is performed by sociotechnical changes. In the contemporary world, the meaning and quality of work, flexibility, virtualization and automation, for example, are phenomena that have already entered the daily life of work relationships. The pandemic demonstrated that the phenomenon of virtualization has come to remain in some sectors. Several companies, for example, closed their physical office headquarters because they observed that it is possible to achieve the same productivity standards remotely with lower fixed costs. Flexible labor markets, which will be more and more frequent, will require security measures for workers and a better balance between the desires of the labor market (employer) and the social rights of workers (Auer, 2007; Boyer, 2006).

In the presented context, this viewpoint aims to present reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic impact in the search for the targets disseminated by the UN SDG 8, considering the Brazilian scenario. Section 2 is dedicated to reflections on SDG 8 targets (8.1 to 8.10), followed by section 3 which presents the final considerations and conclusions. At the end, the references used are listed.

2. Reflections on SDG 8 targets (8.1 to 8.10) in the Brazilian economic context

The reflections presented here are presented individually for each SDG 8 target for most of the targets. However, for some cases, a grouping of ideas was carried out according to the complementarity and proximity of the subjects.

The first target of SDG 8 (8.1) states to *“sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries”* (UN, 2015, p. 19). The Brazilian economy is not among those in less developed countries, and can be allocated to an intermediate block of emerging economies; thus, we do not necessarily expect a 7% growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per year. On the other hand, economic growth is directly related to job offers, better quality of life for all, among other characteristics linked to SDG 8.

The forecast of a 5.4% drop in GDP technically leads the country into a recession and increases the chances of unemployment, generating factors that negatively

corroborate to achieving this target (Corrêa, 2020). To illustrate the situation, the 9.7% drop in GDP in the second quarter of 2020 can be mentioned, which was accompanied by a decline in household consumption by 12.5% (Mendonça, 2020). Brazilian public debt is increasing due to expenses to combat the consequences of the pandemic and Corrêa (2020) points out problems associated with low employment levels and highlights the possibility that many jobs will cease to exist.

The second target (8.2) focuses on reaching *“higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors”* (UN, 2015, p. 19). Despite the existence of excellent companies in Brazil classified as “world class companies”, it is observed that they correspond to a minority. There are many organizations in the country that still lack innovation in their processes and do not use technological resources to increase their productivity or expand sales channels. Specifically regarding the concepts of Industry 4.0, a revolution that has been trending in the world, a CNI survey shows that a good portion of Brazilian entrepreneurs do not even know the term (CNI, 2018).

In general, Brazil presents a technological gap and needs to improve its productivity when compared to other nations with similar economic characteristics (CNI, 2019). In addition, the pandemic has considerably impacted the finances of many entrepreneurs, who were forced to postpone any type of planned investment in improving processes. Even those who have not been significantly affected, will probably wait for a period of a better economic context to invest. In short, we believe that the COVID-19 pandemic will move the updating of Brazilian production systems forward in time and this will further distance the country from the mentioned target.

Focusing on the target 8.3, it is possible to observe that it aims to promote *“development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services”* (UN, 2015, p. 19). The development of public policies is essential for sustainable growth in the long run of any nation. However, in a scenario of post-pandemic economic crisis that is being built, the planning of long-term public policies remains in the background, whether in terms of attention to this topic or allocation of resources / lines of financing, since attention will turn to solving problems associated with budget deficits.

It is also important to highlight the good work that has been developed over the years by institutions such as SEBRAE in supporting micro and small entrepreneurs, for example, but we fear that the allocation of resources for this kind of initiatives are less than those really needed for a sustained growth of micro and small. For Negri et al. (2020), the crisis in public resources for innovation, technology and to enhance the business environment robustness observed in recent years and amplified by the pandemic will considerably impact Brazilian competitiveness. (CNI, 2020) corroborates this argue and highlight that public policies of innovation, technology and assistance to companies of different sizes are essential to create economic resilience, either for this or for future pandemics.

Aspects related to more sustainable growth are presented in targets 8.4 and 8.5. Target 8.4 is in line with the more efficient use of energy resources, less environmental degradation and the diffusion of programs that encourage sustainable production and consumption practices (UN, 2015, p. 19). Target 8.5, in turn, presents aspects more related to the social dimension, emphasizing the need of “*decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value*” (UN, 2015, p. 19). As mentioned in previous paragraphs, there is a period of crisis and slow recovery; we fear that business organizations will stop investing in practices associated with the economic and social dimensions of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) presented by Elkington (1998), doing just the minimum required by law. In this sense, the greater diversity of employees within companies, which is excellent for an innovative environment, may be impaired.

The development of more sustainable and inclusive organizations requires efforts by companies beyond law requirements. Organizations must increasingly invest in the diversity of their employees at all levels, considering gender, race and age diversities. Companies that focus strongly on the economic dimension create jobs that do not adequately value the human aspects of professionals and the possibilities for growth, thus compromising the so-called “decent work”.

Young people are an example of group that will certainly suffer the impacts of the pandemic to a great extent. In fact, this is the theme of target 8.6, which advocates the need to “*substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training*” (UN, 2015, p. 19). Traditionally, in Brazil, it is not easy for young people with no experience to enter the labor market and, in the pandemic, we believe that it will become even more complex due to the reduction in the number of jobs and reduced attention from companies to vacancies dedicated exclusively to these types of professionals. In addition, the number of young people in Brazil who are neither studying nor working is growing, and this has been aggravated by the pandemic. According to (Forum, 2020) 35.2% of young people between 22 and 24 years old are not working or studying in Brazil. High percentages are also found in other age groups.

Regarding the target 8.7, it is associated with human rights, requiring “*immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms*” (UN, 2015, p. 20). Unfortunately, some situations of slavery and child labor still occur in Brazil. As an example of the first, it can be mentioned the rescue of 39 people who worked in a situation similar to slavery in an illegal mining area in the state of Pará (PA, 2020). Brazil has clear laws to eradicate these types of work, and inspection is an extremely important tool for this. However, this inspection needs to be intensified, especially in regions that are farther from large centers. We fear that with the economic crisis that is taking place due to the pandemic, additional resources will not be transferred to inspection operations, preventing better results from this important instrument. This argument is in line with what was mentioned by (Centro de Informação sobre Empresas e Direitos Humanos, 2020), when they highlight that the pandemic may increase slave labor in the world due to less monitoring.

“Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment” (UN, 2015, p. 20) is the theme focused by target 8.8. Labor rights are characterized as an important element in the search for "decent work" and can be considered "symbols" of workers achievements over the decades. With the pandemic, unemployment was intensified in the Brazilian economic scenario and with it, a larger portion of the population is developing informal activities. In addition to not having access to labor rights, these workers are at risk of operating in less secure environments that do not follow the pertinent legislation.

In relation to the target 8.9, it is related to tourism sector and promotion of cultural and local aspects *“devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products”* (UN, 2015, p. 20). Brazil is characterized as a country with intense tourism potential to be explored, with many cultural traditions and plausible local characteristics for this. Unfortunately, with the pandemic, Brazilian tourism has suffered considerably and the recovery will not happen quickly (Cruz, 2020). Many jobs ceased to exist, further increasing unemployment rates in Brazil and compromising the achievement of several targets previously discussed.

The strengthening of the *“capacity of domestic financial institutions to encourage and expand access to banking, insurance and financial services for all”* (UN, 2015, p. 20) are characterized as central themes of the target 8.10. With the economic crisis, many people lost their jobs and their source of income. In an emergency, the Brazilian Federal Government started to pay aid to the most needy and, to operationalize this payment, it was necessary to insert many people into the banking financial system. At the time, it was discovered that a significant portion of the population did not have access to these services. It is projected that around 45 million Brazilians by 2019 were unbanked or under-banked (Valle, 2020), this rate reduced considerable in 2020. Valle (Valle, 2020) mentions that this is a legacy of the pandemic for millions of Brazilians and Dewar (Afonso, 2020) classify this movement as financial inclusion.

Of course, there is still a lot to be done to fully achieve target 8.10. An example is linked to the fact that 2,340 Brazilian municipalities do not have at least one bank branch (Silva, 2020). Although the provision of banking services is being strongly directed towards virtualization, many people still depend on face-to-face service and the absence of branches in a significant number of Brazilian municipalities is worrying.

Finally, targets 8a and 8b relate to actions of a more global nature linked to the support provided by developed countries to emerging countries and the establishment and operationalization of a global strategy to achieve the targets. Since our focus of reflection is based on the Brazilian scenario, the analysis of these goals was not carried out here.

3. Conclusions and general considerations

The targets presented by SDG 8 are important drivers in the search for economic growth and decent work, to enable nations to grow more sustainably. The COVID-19 pandemic has been seriously impacting the world economy and, as a result, undermining the achievement of SDG 8 targets. Focusing on Brazilian scenario, it is observed that the

pandemic has made even more difficult to reach targets that were already a challenge; specially when it is considered the Brazilian public debt forecasts for next years. Actions developed in line with these targets generate not only economic gains, but also allow for a more just, equal and inclusive society.

This viewpoint call attention for issues that demand urgent public policies, otherwise, they can generate losses to an entire generation and to the Brazilian citizens. Our scope in this viewpoint was to analyse the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on SDG-8 in a general way, calling for attention to the mentioned issues. As future studies we suggest to performed specifics studies on each target. For example, considering experts' opinions, to structure guidelines than can be used in public policies. Another possibility of study is to analyse actions that will be taken by the government in order to mitigate the pandemic consequences to society and economy. The reflections presented here can contribute with the debates about the search for decent work in Brazil and with academic debates on decent work.

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